

Proposition 1-A Costs Put Scare into Counties

By TERRY HEYER
It is less than a month since passage of Proposition 1A and nearly four months before it really goes into effect—but already county officials are scared. Administrative costs of implementing the "tax relief" are beginning to be figured up and these costs alone, not to mention the future loss of revenue, are enough to cause at least one county supervisor to call for a legislative investigation of the whole matter.

The chairman of the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, Frank G. Bonelli, declares, "A proper joint legislative interim committee of the state senate and assembly should quickly review the ramifications of the costly procedural steps that county assessors will have to take to implement Proposition 1A."

Under the set-up worked out by the state controller's office, the state will pay the counties 50 cents each for every property owner who files for the \$70 rebate and the \$750 exemption coming to him because of 1A. The 50 cents is to cover processing and mailing—the "procedural steps" referred to by Bonelli. But it won't be enough to cover the costs, and the counties will be stuck with the rest.

The state controller's office estimates that 2.4 million owners of single-family residences will file for the rebates and exemptions, along with another 300,000 owners of duplexes and condominiums. At 50 cents each that would mean the state would pay all counties in the state a grand total of \$1.35 billion. Yet even the state controller's office estimates the administrative cost to Los Angeles County alone at \$1,180,123.

Furthermore, the 50 cents per claimant is to be paid only during the first year of the life of 1A—1968-69. For 1969-70, no state payment to counties is foreseen at all. That year, Los Angeles County will have to expend \$1,010,269 to administer the system. A spokesman for the Los Angeles County Tax Assessor's Office told this newspaper that exact figures are not yet available as to the cost to the county, not covered by state reimbursements, but "it will be high."

Additional personnel will have to be hired, it was revealed, to handle the load of paper work caused by 1A. Inasmuch as the property tax is practically the county's only legal source of revenue (thanks to the inactivity of state legislators with other taxing powers), it is entirely possible that while "tax relief" is being supplied at one end to the property owners, the property tax itself will have to be increased even further, at the other end, to pay for administering the so-called "relief."

The state controller's office will have to spend at least \$200,000 for its own administrative costs. Bonelli wants a joint committee of senators and assemblymen to work with the State Board of Equalization and come up with a plan for computer processing of the claims that will cost less than what the system as now worked out will cost. He is convinced that the need is so urgent that the plan must be worked out before the state legislature reconvenes in January, in order that it can be approved and signed by the governor in time for the March 1 lien date called for in 1A.

Information supplied to county assessors by the state controller's office says that a single form will be used for both the rebate and exemption claims. This form, however, has not yet been finalized. The State Board of Equalization has until March 1 to produce it. The forms will be mailed to all owner-occupied single family residences, duplexes and condominiums, sometime after January 1, as soon as the county receive them from the State Board of Equalization.

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To be eligible, the residence must have been occupied by the owner as his principal place of residence as of March 1, 1968.

For the renter, 1A provides that the personal exemption on the state income tax shall be doubled. That is, the present \$500 exemption for single persons will be doubled to \$1,000; the \$1,000 exemption for married persons will be doubled to \$2,000.

But there is a big hooker. Not only is the exemption not automatic — it must be applied for — it only applies if the renter uses the short form (IBM card) for his state income tax return. If he elects to use the long form, which he must do in order to itemize deductions such as medical expenses, he loses the double exemption.

Along with this hooker, 1A also has a sleeper or two.

For one thing, all brakes have been removed because of 1A from school district and local government indebtedness. Whereas up to now school districts could only go into debt up to a certain percentage of their total assessed valuation, now there is no limit as to how deep they may become mired in debt through the selling of bonds.

And, of course, as long as the state legislature fails to provide school districts and other local jurisdictions with alternate revenue sources, the higher the property taxes will go. Considering how anxious school officials are to expand present school facilities, it is reasonable to expect the property tax rates to soar, now that all restraint has been removed.

Proposition 1A does provide that the state legislature can, at its discretion, establish minimum tax rates for local jurisdictions. But little talk has been heard from Sacramento of establishing any such minimums.

Economists point out that although many citizens are frightened by the overwhelming size of the national debt, which keeps right on growing, the debts of local government, particularly school districts, are growing much faster. 1A now takes away what little control had existed.

Another sleeper effect of 1A which was not mentioned during the campaign by any of its authors is the subject of controversy. It has been stated on the one hand, and denied on the other hand, that 1A effectively destroys the initiative process, by which the citizens, through direct election, may put laws into effect that the state legislature is not willing to pass.

It has been said that under 1A, the legislature may keep initiative measures off the ballot if it does not like them, regardless of whether they receive the required number of signatures or not.

A spokesman for State Senator James Q. Wedworth, one of the co-authors of 1A, denies that this is the case. He says that 1A does not amend the existing constitution but only adds a new section.

A spokesman for County Assessor Philip Watson said that 1A itself does not appear to set up a legislative board of censors to screen initiative measures, but the precedent set by the legislature in hastily passing 1A as a weapon to combat Proposition 9 does, in effect, destroy the initiative process.

The spokesman explained that now the legislature may be expected to put counter-initiatives on the ballot whenever an initiative unpopular with the politicians qualifies for the ballot.

Every state senator and state assemblyman from the southwest area proudly affixed his signature to 1A as a co-author. These are Senators Robert S. Stevens, Anthony C. Beilenson, Mervyn M. Dymally, James Q. Wedworth and Assemblymen Robert G. Beverly, Charles Warren, Lester A. McMillan, Yvonne W. Brathwaite, Jesse M. Unruh, and L. E. Townsend.

1A was defeated by Los Angeles County voters, but gained sufficient support elsewhere to win, statewide.